
Book Review

John Dengate

Avalon, NSW 2107, Australia

When I was asked to review Dr Grahame Webb's (2015) book *Wildlife Conservation: In the Belly of the Beast*, I was a bit uneasy. Cecil, the tame old lion at Hwange National Park in Matabeleland North, Zimbabwe, had just met an untimely end and I had heard Dr Webb's name associated with trophy hunting. But having come to grips with the book, I must say it's a valuable contribution to conservation and the issues that surround it.

Dr Webb writes that if his book "stimulates others to think in more depth about conservation, or helps them better understand and appreciate how bio-politics can enhance or constrain conservation" then his main goal in writing the book will be achieved.

Well I think he can rest assured on that point – the book contains a plethora of examples of rational science being ignored in favour of 'bio-politics' – the rarely-mentioned wheeling and dealing that goes hand in hand with a lot of conservation decisions.

For instance, the 'sea turtle conservation community' estimated the total Caribbean Hawksbill Turtle population as 5000, even though Cuba harvested 5000 adult turtles every year. Armed with reasonable science showing the harvest was sustainable, Cuba applied to CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) to export 500 turtle shells to Japan. It was blocked by the United States of America and conservation interests.

Dr Webb makes a compelling case that the United States was motivated by political factors like blockading Cuba and getting the votes of expatriate Cubans living in the United States. Of more concern is the conclusion that conservation groups were desperate to continue using the Hawksbill as one of their iconic fundraising species – something that would be less than convincing if it were admitted that Hawksbills were thriving in Cuba as part of a sustainable use program.

You might argue that legal trade in secure Cuban Hawksbills would be the best cover for illegal trade in endangered populations from elsewhere, but prohibition on trade in wildlife hasn't exactly been successful – both Tigers and Black Rhinoceros have come much closer to extinction after international trade was banned.

Cuba eventually caved in to the pressure and banned the Hawksbill harvest – bringing a 500 year old tradition to an end. The World Wildlife Fund is providing the turtle fishing communities with "sustainable economic alternatives" (http://www.wwf.ca/about_us/successes/hawksbill/). I can't help wondering if they will support the communities in the long term.

One of the most iconic conservation issues is that of elephants, and the ivory they produce. Dr Webb points out that “given the opportunity, wild elephants will continually multiply until they ultimately destroy the habitat in which they live.” I’ve seen a graphic demonstration of this in Kenya’s Amboseli National Park where a few remaining monkeys clung pathetically to tree stumps – the last remnants of a woodland eaten out by elephants.

Dr Webb argues that instant death from culling is far more humane than a slow, agonising end from starvation. He further points out that some of the culling can be done by controlled trophy hunting, with the resulting revenue benefiting local communities – who then value the animals as a source of income, rather than seeing them as an agricultural pest.

This may be a distasteful argument, but it also seems to be a compelling one – provided the controls on the program ensure a humane and sustainable harvest.

A similar point can be made with trophy hunting of crocodiles in the Northern Territory.

Dr Webb’s personal involvement in the commercial aspects of crocodiles gives him a valuable perspective on the sometimes perverse results of the costs of wildlife regulation.

I guess the government position is that any industry using a protected species should fund the regulatory regime that ensures the species is harvested sustainably and humanely. But in the case of crocodiles, the costs of CITES compliance could be having a perverse impact on the species.

For example, a crocodile has 66 teeth, each of which you can sell for between \$5–\$10, once you have cleaned, drilled and mounted it on a leather thong.

But to sell that crocodile’s teeth overseas, each tooth needs a separate export permit from Australia and in some cases, an import permit from the destination. Each permit takes about 40 working days and about \$60 in fees and costs. So to sell the teeth from one farmed crocodile, could take nearly \$8000 in permit fees. OK, the skin is the main product, but one impact of this cost structure is to favour agriculture over wildlife production – with consequent damage to natural ecosystems.

Another likely impact of this cost structure is to drive the trade underground – if it’s impossible to comply with the costs of CITES, then people will look for underground ways to sell their produce – especially in hard-pressed third world countries.

I can’t help thinking that at the heart of this book is the clash of the generations. On the one hand, Dr Webb provides compelling rational arguments for the controlled commercial use of wildlife, but you can hear his (mostly younger, urban) opponents saying how they hate the idea of killing anything and especially dislike firearms.

Perhaps this difference stems from today’s society being separated from the realities of despatching farm animals for food. I suspect that our farming grandfathers would find

current attitudes to wildlife rather inconsistent – at least for those of us who eat meat or fish.

And speaking of attitudes, one of the inescapable lessons from this book is that unfortunately, scientific facts frequently come a poor second to emotion when it comes to why people adhere to particular beliefs.

Emotional responses often come from experiences. So politicians probably won't have any personal support for a cause unless they have had a relevant experience. And even when they have, they won't take action unless it is OK with the electorate. Which is why using the media to get grass roots support for something is so important.

And also why the most prominent conservation and animal welfare organisations are the most expert at using the media.

In this controversial book, Dr Webb applies scientific method to the field of conservation and often finds it wanting.

The book is full of examples of conservation decisions taken for political reasons against scientific evidence – it's a thought-provoking work – and a scary read! Everyone should have a look at it.

Reference

Webb G. (2015) *Wildlife Conservation: In the Belly of the Beast*. Charles Darwin University Press, Darwin, NT.
